

IS SIBERIAN REINDEER HERDING IN CRISIS? LIVING WITH REINDEER FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER THE END OF STATE SOCIALISM

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Abstract

Most commentators on Siberian reindeer herding conclude that the dramatic drop in the numbers of domestic reindeer after the collapse of state socialism point to a crisis in reindeer husbandry. This article argues that instead of focusing on numbers we should focus on the way people form new relationships with reindeer in order to take advantage of opportunities thrown up by the post-Soviet landscape. By making reference to two case studies in the taiga and treeline areas, the author gives examples of 'interstitial practices' that reindeer herders use to survive and profit from fractured and over-regulated spaces. The author argues that the unique skills of reindeer herding, which allow people to alter the way that they use space and react to temporal pressures, give post-Soviet reindeer herders a unique adaptive strategy in a post-Soviet economy.

Keywords: Siberia, reindeer-herding, Zabaikal'e, Evenkiia, Evenki, World-systems theory, globalisation

Introduction

It has been almost fifteen years since market reforms crept out of the central Russian cities to reach the taiga and tundra of Central Siberia.¹ Although most rural hunters and herders greeted the reforms to Soviet central planning with great initial enthusiasm, the aftermath of privatisation has been dramatic. Almost all commentators note a dramatic decline if not collapse of reindeer numbers all across the taiga zone and in many places across the tundra. The apocalyptic language of crisis is used in academic works, in the newspapers, and in the anxious proposals of non-governmental organisations.

While I would agree that the Soviet reindeer herding *industry* (*olenevodstvo*) was greatly damaged, in many places mortally so, by the removal of state subsidies, I do not think that the same can be said of people's *relationships* with reindeer. Undoubtedly the way people keep reindeer in Siberia has changed since the end of Soviet times. What is required, however, is careful attention to how it has changed instead of a requiem. In this article, I would like to review the changes in the relationship between people and reindeer in two places across central Siberia: in the tundra-taiga borderzone of north-eastern Evenkiia, and in the taiga of Zabaikal'e. In all places there has been a dramatic drop in reindeer numbers, so much so that we can safely conclude that industrial reindeer herding no longer exists. However, the small-scale,

almost autarkic, way people stay with reindeer continues to function in a complex way in the newly privatised landscape. While it would be wrong to claim that people's lives are easy in regions suffering the total collapse of public transport, health care, the national insurance system, and of the monetary economy, it is striking that conditions today are not unlike the way that they were before the arrival of Soviet modernity. I do not wish to present a naïve picture of wily herders triumphing over socio-economic chaos. As I will demonstrate in the conclusion, following David Harvey (1996), the new forms of oligarchic economic liberalism in the region have generated changes in the way that people relate to space, time and the perception of their surroundings. However, I will argue that these changes are not unprecedented within the tradition of how one lives with reindeer in these regions. Elaborating on Anna Sirina's work (2002, 2006), it is possible to identify a particular way that Evenki herders 'order their living environment' (*organizatsiia sredy zhiznedeiatel'nosti*). In so doing they recognise and take advantage of opportunities that the chaos of restructuring opens up. I wish to leave the reader with an image of Siberian practices of living with reindeer as an interstitial practice that adjusts itself not so much to dislocations caused by the wider economy, but to opportunities created by changes in the way that capital is reclassified in the global economy.

Reindeer Relationships in the Global Economy

For most people, reindeer-herding seems to be an anachronistic occupation which is blissfully isolated from the main currents of economic change. The reality, however, is quite the opposite. The relationship between people and reindeer is a very sensitive indicator of globalisation. Like most pastoralists, mobile reindeer herders manage a complex relationship between social relationships of ownership, forage conditions on the ground, and the reproductive and social dynamics within herds (Bjørklund 1994). However, perhaps unlike mobile pastoralists working with cattle, buffalo or camels, reindeer herders work with an animal that, while being quite gregarious, resists enclosure. This is not to say that reindeer pastoralism is more complex than other types of herding or rural adaptations. However, it is important to point out that reindeer live out their lives within particularly dramatic temporal and spatial rhythms, which carry interesting and often profitable consequences for their human hosts. These ecological facts keep reindeer herders slightly out-of-step from centrally scripted choreography (Anderson & Nuttall 2004). In many cases this is the strength of the economy – an economy that encourages flexibility and adaptation. However, in places where state or economic managers try especially hard to normalise or specify the reindeer herding relationship, reindeer herding vanishes.

The very recent stereotype of reindeer herding as an activity that is especially exotic, traditional and remote is also a symptom of a new globalised adaptation. Using the terms of Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli (1998), in the most recent epoch of the development of the global economy, natural places have become a form of capital in and of themselves. Whether Siberian reindeer herders are able to market themselves as 'natural economies' deserving of preservation and conservation, or if they can position themselves as the wardens of resource-rich expanses of taiga whose signature is a prerequisite for international investment, their marginality is a source of strength. They have become 'ecological ethnicities' evocative for the resilience of their adaptation and yet, with their passion for trading furs or for extensive travels to visit and drink with neighbouring kin, still just one step away from being properly professional natural managers.

A number of students of globalisation from David Harvey (1989, 1996) to Latour (1993) argue that the objects of global reach must be amenable to restructuring in spatial and temporal terms before their activities can be represented as a form a value. The techniques used to regularise rural activities range from the crudely colonial forms of enclosure to the semantic imposition of copyrights on genetic resources. Resistance to these forms of regulation is usually styled as a form of time travel wherein proprietary rights to space or to species are disputed through claims to aboriginal status – literally to being the primary or 'first' holder of a resource. While this discourse is prevalent in Siberia as well, what is interesting about the analysis of reindeer herding in post-Soviet conditions is the fact that other strategies are equally effective. The reindeer herder's strongest suit is the fact that a skilled herder is very much able to alter the spatial and temporal references within which reindeer are kept, and by extension, within which reindeer move. Such a skill takes full advantage of the semantic, temporal and territorial fragmentation that is such a tragic quality of the post-Soviet landscape.

To illustrate how ordering of time and space can allow for successful adaptations, I will present two case studies, each chosen from a different ecological region of Siberia. I will present the context in each case, and then analyse how the use of time, space and meaning has changed in each place in the fifteen years since the collapse of the centralised Soviet economy. The conclusion will emphasise the interstitial aspect of Siberian reindeer herding. It will conclude that successful reindeer herding operations are of medium size (approximately 200–500 head) and will be held together with complex kinship and ownership structures. Almost universally, each enterprise will be shown to lack clear rights of access to land and to markets, but will instead thrive upon their knowledge of opportunities outside their immediate environment.

Case 1: The Hunting, Trapping and Herding Association ‘Beiun’ (Zabaikal’e)

The Vitim river is a ‘classic’ area for the study of Evenki reindeer husbandry. Not only does this region form the backdrop for the works of Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff (1933, 1935) whose work is perhaps best known by English-language readers, but the region has been subject to some of the most tumultuous restructuring of herding of any region in Siberia. In the Imperial area, Evenki herders in this region worked closely with placer gold miners around Lake Baunt. Located at the very frontiers of the Far Eastern Republic during the civil war period (and at the centre of the short-lived Vitim-Olekma National District), Evenkis here suffered some of the most brutal reprisals during centralisation of state power in the 1930s. Yet, during high Soviet times, the Tungokochen state farm and the Ust’-Karenga GosPromKhoz presented some of the most centralised and yet competitive dramatic examples of economic modernisation in the socialist period (Anderson 1991, 1992; Fondahl 1989, 1996). It is perhaps not surprising that the post-Soviet privatisation of enterprises was also among the most dramatic.

In 1992 all of the assets of the Tungokochen *sovkhos*, including its reindeer, were divided up among members of the state farm. Most individuals interested in claiming reindeer claimed them in groups of ten or twelve. One enterprising young Evenki herder, Nikolai Aruneev, formed an association of a dozen individuals into a ‘working-unit’ (*tovarishchestvo*), and thus collectively managed to amass a herd of approximately 450 reindeer. Perhaps more importantly, the association ‘Beiun’ gained long-term lease rights to the enormous territories upon which the former state farm herds used to travel along the watershed between the Vitim and the Nercha rivers. The ensuing years brought many challenges to the young director and to the reindeer. A power struggle within the working-unit meant that parts of the assets had to be carved off. Fortunately, most of the reindeer were kept together. More recently, as Russian hunters began to return to the region as private trappers, there have been attempts to fracture off significant portions of their herding territory and ‘re-lease’ them to newcomers who pay higher rents. Nevertheless over the past fourteen years the reindeer numbers in this post-Soviet working-unit have remained stable at between 300 and 500 head, and the family who herd them have sufficient resources to barter for industrial trade goods.²

The success of the association comes at a high price. In order to keep reindeer numbers up, the proportion of cows in the herd must remain as high as it was in Soviet times – around 60 percent. The large number of calves born every spring suffers a high mortality rate to bears and wolves, so much so that the herders often do not bother naming some of the animals until they are in their third year. Further, in order to protect the herd from predators, the herders must wander the higher places in the landscape away from the main river

corridors, which are the preferred hunting areas of bears. The challenges of keeping a herd predominantly made up of cows are also great, necessitating special preparations for the breeding season as well as during the calving season. This high labour cost is a compensation both for the lack of state-sponsored culls of predators as in recent Soviet times, as for the fact that the huge resettlements of high Sovietism created a landscape largely empty of constant human habitation (and thus potential hunters of bears and wolves). The need to choose herding territories carefully and to manage an expansive herd structure has had a particular effect on the domestic relationship. As many older Evenki observers comment when thinking of Aruneev's reindeer, they are seen as mostly 'wild' and not possessing the high level of training and attention to herders that the herds of the past used to have. An illustration of this is the current lack of any reindeer trained for saddle riding. All of the herders prefer to walk with their deer strung out behind them in long caravans. The herders themselves admit, when speaking about their deer and the worn saddle-bags that they use, that they simply 'do not have time to make pretty things'. The condition of post-socialist herding does not leave time for a high culture of domestication.

Although the association initially managed to gain access to an extremely large territory, the amount of this space that was useful to herders is quite limited. The northern part of Chita oblast' suffers from severe forest fires which not only destroy lichen pastures but leave behind a devastated landscape of fallen trees and broken ground which is dangerous to travel upon. According to Nikolai Aruneev, the fires are caused by careless immigrant hunters and trappers who are either careless with their campfires or careless with their motorised transport. Some Evenkis in the area also blame the recent boom economy in abandoned moose and reindeer antlers for the destruction of the landscape. They accuse some traders of deliberately setting fire to valleys in order to clear underbrush to make ghostly white outlines of discarded antlers more visible against the charred background. Aruneev identifies a direct relationship between the presence of motorised vehicles, and the massive destruction of territory which creates huge 'dead zones' over which herders must cross; as if the destruction of the land is a punishment to the incoming trappers. The patchwork landscape of burned-out areas generates its own pressures on herders. Ironically, as if to compensate for the large areas of forage which have been lost, Evenki herders have adopted a regional form of controlled burning of marshes in early spring in order to quickly produce thick green grass for the reindeer at a time when forage is low. Further, in the summers the herd must be kept in some of the most isolated valleys along the Nercha watershed – rugged valleys which are unattractive to hunters who use motorised transport and thus have remained in a more or less pristine state.

In the winters, the association has much more freedom of movement. Indeed, at this time, life with the herd comes into its own. The association is

still kept as a loose confederation of semi-autonomous herders. Each one has the right to take reindeer out from the herd for use as transport in the yearly hunt of sable and other fur-bearers. Winter hunting territories can range some 200–300 kilometres from the summer pastures, however there is another irony here. Although all of the herders have used these outlying areas since their youth, and their fathers and grandparents used them before, technically they are often accused of poaching on lands that have been formally assigned to incoming trappers. The clear image that we get is of a restriction of authorised space around the association, which keeps its home pasture in a high valley straddling the Pacific/Arctic watershed. As is typical to his character, the director Aruneev laughs off these accusations. ‘How can we poach on our own lands?’ he replies. He further quips that the herders only travel to these neighbouring places at times in the year when they would be inaccessible to the all-terrain vehicles of the Russians. The ready independence of the association is underscored by the fact that they do not keep a two-way radio, nor do they regularly visit the village for many months at a time. The herders of Beiun also keep a respectful distance away from the local branch of the indigenous NGO ‘The Association of the Native Sparse Peoples of Siberia and the Far East’ (more commonly known by its English acronym RAIPON). They claim that activists in the political association are fighting battles mainly for their own interests, and to this end they cite the fact that RAIPON gave its consent to release large parcels of land to immigrant trappers. Consequently, most people in Tungokochen have a very hazy idea of what life is like at Beiun and what their plans and movements are. This image of the association taking advantage of places and seasons that are out of reach to other trappers is a very clear illustration of the post-socialist adaptive strategy.

The association today is a loosely-structured association of Evenki kinsmen related by blood or by marriage to the Aruneev family. They make creative use of the assets left by socialist reindeer herding, having been left prepared campsites, corrals and log-cabins from the previous state farm. Their day-to-day style of land use can be described as spontaneous. No one person knows in which direction the collective will migrate a day or so ahead. A major change of camp is planned, or rather announced, a few minutes before preparations are made. The herders, therefore, are specialists in sorting out temporary accommodation. They are used to assembling wooded lean-tos (*balagan*) quickly or often setting a circular conical frame over which they stretch large plastic sheets (cf. Anderson 2006). Although these temporary structures may at first glance seem to be a sign that traditions are fading, it is difficult not to admire the skill and speed at which resources at-hand are employed to make accommodation.

One of the most memorable aspects of life with the Beiun association is the creative way that old and modern ritual is combined to bring about a successful enterprise. The most regular contact that the association has with the

outside world is during the bi-annual arrival of the Chita veterinarians who use the herd as an experimental ground for their own research into reindeer medicines. Through personal contacts, the director ensures that almost every animal is inoculated with extra shots of antibiotics. Parallel to this, the inoculations involve a ritual blood-letting from the area of the gall-bladder (pierced through the skin) or from the end of the reindeer's tail – a very old method of healing. The major ritual days in the yearly round probably correspond to the narrow times when one can commence providing either velvet or mature antlers to the Chinese market or fur to the Russian market. However, these commercial dates are interspersed with knowledge of Orthodox feast days which structure their measure of 'luck' (*kut*) in these endeavours. One of the most dramatic rituals is Aruneev's attempt to revive ritual reindeer slaughters where one reindeer is specially skinned and hung in a tree in order to attract the benevolence of spirits on the land. On the one hand, the revival of traditions demonstrates a remarkable respect for older, pre-Soviet traditions. Nevertheless, they are surprising in that these particular rituals have probably not been practised for forty or fifty years. To my mind they express well the highly contingent and opportunistic quality to how reindeer are kept in the region.

Case 2: Reindeer Herding around Lake Essei (Evenkiia)

At the edge of the treeline, in the far northeastern corner of the Evenki Autonomous District, is the large shallow lake of Essei. The lake lies in the centre of a wide basin near the Kotoi river. From here most of northern Asia is in easy access by means of water or by means of overland reindeer caravan routes. Indeed, the early colonial history of Central Siberia is closely linked to this place. Essei hosted a Cossack fort in 1628 and the first Orthodox chapel in 1840 – one of the oldest chapels in the region. Today, the deeply religious Yakut residents of the village on the side of the lake link their lives, their fate and the origin of their community to Jesus moving across the land and creating this lake in the shape of a cross.

In today's modernist geography, generated by helicopter flights and telephone lines, Essei is considered to be one of the most isolated villages in the district. It lies 480 km north of the capital Tura and is often characterised in terms of what it lacks: stable electricity, a stable shoreline, a regular winter road, a central heating system. However, Essei is one of the few refuges of reindeer herding in a district which suffered greatly from the collapse of centralised state farming.

Evenkiia, like Chita province, was an enthusiastic participant in the early market privatisation. Here, unlike in the south, reindeer were divided in 1992 not on an individual basis but in family collectives using the experimental form of a 'clan enterprise' (*rodovoe khoziaistvo*). In 1992, 20,000 head of state reindeer were divided up among thirty-nine clan enterprises across Evenkiia and

nine located in the vicinity of Lake Essei. The definition of 'clan' was an open one. Almost any group of extended kin could apply to be a clan enterprise. Although the term seemed to have an evocative link to the tribute-paying clans of Imperial times, in essence the term was used essentially as a gloss for a group of native kinsmen. By 2002 almost all of these clan enterprises were inactive. Their operations were literally frozen due to great debts for fuel, helicopter transport, or to the tax inspection services. Those enterprises that were still liquid were engaged in the trade of wild meat products using snowmobiles and large transport trucks on winter roads. The few active reindeer enterprises remained in the middle of the district, in Surinda, and in the far north at Essei and Ekonda. The reindeer entrepreneurs, much like those living in Chita province, lived an invisible life from the point of view of the state (perhaps even deliberately so in order to avoid further taxation). Most reports of their activities in 2002 were more rumour than fact. These spoke of small family groups living in various valleys holding reindeer in numbers ranging from a dozen around Tura to 500 around the village of Ekonda. In 2003 at Lake Essei there were approximately 400 head of reindeer formally owned by a dozen different families. Most were held collectively in the summer by a small brigade of relatives who received a small wage for guarding the deer. In the winter, the reindeer would be distributed among owners in the village and would take up places in various bays around the lake, where the owners would use them for transport and to haul fur and fish.

There is an important political quality to the way reindeer are held at Essei. Since Essei Yakut society today does truly structure itself through the identity of patrilineal clans, even at the village level it is very difficult to gain information about other people's reindeer operations. In 2002 there was one group of eighty head of reindeer held at the north end of the lake by the controversial clan Maimago, who had just lost an ambitious bid to lead a sort of 'coup d'état' against the existing village leadership. In the taiga rivers far to the south, another clan held a larger herd of 250 head preferring to live removed entirely from life in the village. Here, as with Zabaikal'e, there is practically no connection between reindeer herding and the advocacy of the local branch of RAIPON.

A second important quality to reindeer herding in the region is the way that reindeer are intimately linked to identity. The Yakuts living at Lake Essei speak very fondly of reindeer and their skills at keeping them. Almost all residents today recite the village legend of the fact that in 1932 one family held more than 10,000 head of reindeer in one herd.³ Reindeer not only give a family an opportunity to exercise and display their skill and independence, they respond in a highly personal way to individual people. Essei is one of the only places in the immense Putoran region where I heard older women giving accounts of using reindeer for healing rituals. Previously throughout this entire region it was felt that an individual who grows up in and among reindeer shares a 'road'

with one special deer. In the case of serious illness that special reindeer can be selected to be tied up, brought into the tent, and encourage to breathe on an infected area. In more serious cases, an illness can be extracted from the patient and transferred to his or her reindeer. This type of ritual, the older women felt, was also dying out for the simple fact that not many people grow up together with reindeer today.

The relatively small numbers of reindeer at Essei today are a startling contrast linked to a remarkable ecological artefact of Soviet planning. Industrial hunts of migratory wild reindeer at water crossings in Taimyr created conditions that led to the destabilisation of the internal structure of the wild herd and its periodic migratory patterns. Beginning in the late 1970s, migratory caribou from Taimyr began to enter the Kotoi valley in numbers that were historically unprecedented. This led to an immediate boom at Lake Essei as Soviet government officials led an attempt to build an industrialised form of reindeer slaughtering in the taiga much as had been developed in Taimyr at river crossings. The resulting slaughters of overwintering deer led to even more unstable migrations of wild reindeer to the extent that all of the domestic herd at Chirinda was destroyed, and most of the domestic herd at Ekonda and Essei was also carried away by the wild caribou. The fact that a handful of families at Essei managed to keep reindeer at all is indeed a monument to their skill.

Although the numbers of reindeer at Essei are few, I am hesitant to classify this place as one suffering the eclipse of reindeer husbandry for the intense interest held by the young and old alike in the skills. There has been a lot of talk about importing fresh herds of reindeer from Olenek (Sakha Republic) to revive the industry. While this Soviet-era technique of patching up reindeer pastoralism may seem to be grand and extremely expensive today, the Essei Iakuts are not without their neo-Soviet patrons. Many wealthy clans at the Lake keep close contacts with diamond magnates in the Sakha Republic as well as with the new oil oligarchy which heads the administration in Tura. The Essei Iakuts have managed to market their isolation and their traditions to the oil oligarchs so well that the village has become a test platform for the benevolence of Iukos. Since the Zolotarev administration came into power on 8 April 2002 the village has been provided with a new satellite communication system, an electronic mail link, investment in a new type of aircraft to reach the village, and there has been talk of increasing the numbers of reindeer in the area. This political lobbying is perhaps the best illustration of the way that Essei Iakuts try to build their traditions and skills into the new framework of power in post-Soviet Russia.

Reindeer Relationships in the Post-Soviet Landscape

Most state reindeer management paradigms have traditionally focussed upon the size of herds, and sometimes the numbers of reindeer in different age/sex

categories, as the best way to understand the health of a herd. This stands in stark contrast to local views, which are sensitive to understanding of landscape. To a herder, the art of living with reindeer is balancing human units, reindeer units, and the complex way that forage is stored on the land, or under the snow. To quote a retired veterinarian in the Evenki district, Anatolii Amel'kin: 'Reindeer come and go like the wind. Their numbers expand and collapse over night. It is the taiga that remains'.

After the onslaught of privatisation, very few herding units that remained in central Siberia, like those analysed here, were battle worn but proved sustainable due to a great part to the stubbornness of their owners, a great deal of luck, but also a certain canniness in knowing how to adapt to a new space/time regime of the post-socialist state. In adapting to the demands of the state and market, they also fine-tuned a unique approach to knowing the land. In this section I wish to highlight these three factors, and in so doing try to move the analysis of post-Soviet reindeer herding beyond a concern about numbers.

Space

One of the great paradoxes stemming from the privatisation of state interests in reindeer was the devastating effect that the lack of access to helicopter transport had upon reindeer enterprises. Common sense would dictate that being freed from the state regulatory regime, and being in possession of one of the most flexible transport resources in the Arctic – reindeer, that access to airborne transport would be the least of reindeer herder's worries. Administrators often cite the herder's nostalgia for helicopters as yet another symptom of the weakening and extinction of traditional skills. Like many stereotypes, the belief that it should be easy to work with reindeer without mechanised transport is based on a partial understanding of what it means to live with reindeer in the patchwork matrix that is a post-Soviet landscape.

Although the loosening of state regulations has meant that the many authorised activity areas, the so-called 'exclusive territories', of Soviet state socialism are no longer enforced, seventy years of creating parcelled spaces has created a special post-socialist ecology. From the two short ethnographic studies above, it should be clear that Soviet rural planners were unusually interested in carving up the taiga into various zones of authority. The most visible artefacts of this anxiety to parcel space are the relatively large villages around which all social activity was to orbit. These urbanised spaces create huge empty zones – dead zones – around themselves wherein it is difficult or impossible to keep reindeer, hunt, or even collect firewood. Helicopters became an 'ad hoc' solution to the problems presented by the industrial hop-scotch taiga, allowing hunters and herders to jump over zones that reindeer could not cross. The sad reality of the post-Soviet ecology is that these zones remain, and there is no solution to them.

The successful post-Soviet herder is a master of using tundra or taiga patches. Since to be a successful herder (without a helicopter) one must live 'out' in the forest for longer periods of time than before, the herder must be ever more conscious of the places where moose or fish can be caught, but nevertheless avoid places too rich in these resources for fear of bears and wolves. All of these places would have also been known by the herder living in Soviet conditions, but in this new landscape, he or she must also know how to *move* from patch to patch in an appropriate order so that the reindeer herd can be kept together and in a good fit condition. In each of the case studies, the two successful herding units are pretty much centred around the best or even the last remaining area for large-scale husbandry. To a great extent the failure of their neighbours can be blamed upon the disadvantages created by the place from which they started exploiting their fractured landscape.

There is another scalar aspect in the perception of space that has followed from the collapse of the regulated state socialist economy. In Soviet times, hunters and herders would be forced to 'gravitate' to authorised 'points' where they would 'surrender' (*sdavat*) fur and meat. Now the wild market of oligarchic capitalism offers no pre-authorised points of sale. Successful hunters and herders are not strangers to the fur middlemen of Iakutsk, Irkutsk, Novosibirsk or even St Petersburg. They require an extensive knowledge of the points of contact with market procurers, which go well beyond the parochial frames of Soviet times. To some degree, the success of each of the middle-size operations analysed here has been built upon the experience of young students who in the last years of the Soviet era travelled out to receive a higher education and then returned to the village with their knowledge of urban contexts. To a great extent, successful reindeer husbandry in rural Siberia cannot be imagined without understanding those real personal links that tie the rural space to global urban spaces.

Time

When leaving a city, or one's university, to stay for a while in a place where people keep reindeer, the first thing that strikes the researcher is the powerful effect that the reindeer's seasonal round has upon human activity. The movements of reindeer, and their hosts, are affected by the timing of the rut and breeding season, the date the black flies appear, or the mushrooms. All of these cyclical seasonal changes, and many more, carry strong implications for herders. People's own sleeping cycle may need to be reversed to keep track of reindeer. All other life projects, such as trade or schooling, must be dropped at certain times in order to tend to smudge fires or to search for reindeer who have unexpectedly wandered far from their usual places. The strong link between how the taiga or tundra order events, and how it affects human action, is a constant when trying to understand reindeer economies.

Over the last fifteen years, what is most striking is the absence of rather arbitrarily timed Soviet ritual in the tending of reindeer. As is well reported in the literature, the yearly round for a Soviet herder was overwhelmingly marked by accounting practices. Although specific practices might be timed differently in each region, it was almost universal that animals had to be counted three or four times a year, and most crucially after the calving season and just before the autumn slaughter. The madness in the ritual lay in the fact that most herders already knew exactly how many reindeer they kept. There are other aspects of the Soviet calendar which are conspicuous by their absence. The greatest absence is felt by the coming and going of particular ritual calendar days ranging from the 'Day of the Reindeer Herder' (marked on different days in different places) to solemn days such as the 'Day of the October Revolution' or even voting days. Perhaps the most shocking change is the peaceful way that 1st September comes and goes when living on the land. In Soviet times there would have been great anxiety about retrieving school-age children to start the school year in the boarding schools. Now, in some reindeer communities, some children do not take schooling at all. The days pass quietly, unremarkably, and somewhat nostalgically for those living with reindeer.

In the absence of this externally imposed social ritual, how is time marked by people out on the land? The most obvious change is a greater sensitivity to aspects of the seasonal cycle which build opportunities to harvest profitable commodities. All across Siberia, keeping reindeer is no longer a matter of managing herds for greater numbers but of keeping reindeer to facilitate in the harvesting of velvet antlers, berries or fur. Across Siberia, the timing of the fur hunt is probably the most stable constant. While these two examples of attention to the life cycles of animals may make it seem that people are falling into 'natural' seasonal cycles, it is important to emphasise the global framework within which these cycles are determined. The deep winter fur hunt is an event that is timed and ordered by the market which prefers deep rich furs on a pelt (rather than, for example, the seemingly absurd idea of using skins for leather). Although the harvesting of antlers follows a strict natural rhythm, the attention to these rhythms has never been so intense due to the voracious market for these items in China and Korea.

The severe industrial impacts upon the taiga have their temporal implications as well. The patchwork landscape forces hunters and herders into temporal funnels. While living in particularly isolated summer or winter pastures, some herders might find the time to leisurely repair harnesses or build new dwellings. However, the seasonally rhythmic lives of most people living with reindeer in Siberia today are punctuated by brutally abbreviated periods when they must somehow cross the wastelands caused by industry. If one adds to this equation the fact that external factors, be they market opportunities or the need to get one's children to school, create specific time pressure points when one must cross these 'dead zones' in order to achieve an important goal

for the benefit of one's kindred. With the responsibility for transporting oneself and one's herd falling once again squarely on the shoulders of each herding family, the chaotically structured landscapes generated periods of abbreviated time stress, not unlike the time-space acceleration that has been identified to be the quality of recent forms of capital accumulation.

Knowledge

Needless to say, the way that people understand the productivity, health and movements of their herds has altered dramatically in the post-Soviet landscape. The most tangible change is again expressed as a lack: the relaxation in the skills that were once necessary to keep herds together in an *accountable* form. In the Soviet period, the loss of a single reindeer could have serious consequences for a herder with reprisals ranging from fines to imprisonment. Consequently, the techniques of herding reindeer did not encourage taking risks in order to use reindeer for transport or to explore new pastures. Today's herding seems to take place in a refreshingly unaccountable context to such a degree that one is no longer entirely sure of the absolute numbers of reindeer that are kept. To reflect this, one can understand the growing interest in older ways of marking one's subservience to the spirits on the land.

Does this level of unpredictability add up to a weakening of the form of domestication? It is true that older herders universally remark an increasing wildness of domestic herds that speaks to a weakening of the link between people and deer. This can be read absolutely in the dramatic examples from Evenkiia and Taimyr where reindeer literally become wild. It can also be read into smaller examples where the 'time' is no longer available to negotiate an intimate relationship with reindeer to train them to saddle (as in Zabaikal'e) or to use them for healing (as in Evenkiia).

Compensating for the increased diffuseness of people's direct relationship with particular reindeer is an increase in how herders today cultivate knowledge with human actors beyond their immediate territories. If in the Imperial past herders would take advantage of their mobility to alter their migrations to encounter traders, and in the Soviet era they would cultivate herds according to the production targets of highly localised state farms, today herders have to be very entrepreneurial in how they access markets (Anderson 2003). Those older herders who rely completely on local markets seem in these regions to be the ones that suffer financial crisis earlier. If the immediate relationship of people to deer is weaker, it is striking on how reindeer are now kept in a higher relation of dependence on external markets.

The diffuse nature of the local domestic relation, and the extensive sensitivity that herders now have to external interests, come together if we analyse the way that herders come to understand their local ecology of parcelled, authorised spaces. The knowledge of how to exploit spatial and temporal niches in the taiga and tundra is by and large a knowledge held by reindeer

herders: people who are experts in manipulating these relationships. The post-Soviet landscape differs from Imperial or Soviet landscapes by the large number (perhaps chaotic quantity) of temporal and spatial anomalies that can be exploited only by a person with highly localised resources. A person entirely reliant on centralised state plans, or on mechanised equipment requiring inputs from distant refineries or factories, is not well placed to live in this ecology. Thus in the spatial and temporal fractal landscape presented by the post-Soviet economy, a certain type of opportunistic reindeer herding survives. To invoke Anna Sirina's phrase in a somewhat different mood than she may have intended it, reindeer herders do not only possess a type of passive 'organisation' that allows them to exploit the environment, but they actively 'organise' the fragmented ecology into a form that is understandable to their skills in using the land. Reindeer knowledge in an active mood is the most striking quality of successful enterprises fifteen years after the end of the Soviet period.

Conclusion

Although the end of centralised subsidies spelled an end to the era of Soviet industrial reindeer herding, it has not spelled the end of the relationship between people and reindeer. As this comparative essay has demonstrated, people continue to live with reindeer, and to thrive at it, in various locations across Central Siberia. It is true that the numbers of reindeer held are not nearly as grandiose as they were during the Soviet period, but the quantity of reindeer do not stand for the relationship between people and deer. Reindeer herders working in a post-Soviet landscape must work with peculiar new qualities, to which they have adapted their style of herding. These qualities can be summarised as:

- Struggling with a patchwork landscape featuring many 'dead zones' created by Soviet industrialism.
- The growth of a mixed economy implying the revival of a type of flexible herding to maximise other opportunities (such as fur hunting).
- The globalisation of markets requiring a knowledge of contacts and connections outside one's local area.
- The growth in the potential of 'marketing' reindeer herding itself as a newly 'natural' form of enterprise.

Post-Soviet reindeer herders have responded to these qualities with a unique adaptation: an adaptation which is invisible to those comfortable with the state-centred norms and measures of the past. This is first and foremost a reduced number of reindeer ranging between 50 and 500 head. This reduction in numbers has been noticed by many commentators, but this in and of itself does not capture the canniness of the adaptation. Beyond a reduction in numbers, post-Soviet reindeer herding has the following features:

- An ‘interstitial’ quality where the most successful herders can be found at the places where borders between other enterprises and licensing regimes are the weakest.
- An ‘elliptical’ or partizan quality where herders spend very little time and effort to connect with sedentary centres of power.
- A great flexibility (or unpredictability) in the setting of migration routes and the timing of migrations.
- A reduction in the intrapersonal quality of the reindeer relation but greater effort spent at linking reindeer economies to agencies outside the home spaces.
- Complex (or ambiguous) ownership relationships within the herd.
- An ‘active’ attention to the organisation of space and time.

Although in this article I have sketched out a comparative perspective to derive these qualities of the post-Soviet adaptation, more attention needs to be devoted to this issue. The first step in writing about active reindeer relationships is to leave behind the state-centred anxiety about absolute numbers to focus on how people are building new relationships in post-Soviet times. One way to structure an ethnography of post-Soviet adaptations is to summarise the new spatial and temporal qualities to the way that semi-nomadic herders today fit into the global economy. Harvey’s (1996) work on this matter provides an example of how the use of space and time in local settings can be thought of broadly.

However, this comparative exercise does suggest that we should be cautious of Harvey’s praise for the political ‘progressiveness’ of urban communities as compared to rural ‘parochial’ environments (Parajuli 2001). One quality that comes out of almost any study of a reindeer herding community, and perhaps any pastoralist community, is the very cagey and indirect relationship these mobile communities have with centres of political power. This wilful independence could be characterised as a form of political apathy. However, in these examples there is evidence that successful herders deliberately avoid tangling themselves not only with representatives of state power, but also the growing ‘civil society’ of indigenous NGOs. I would argue that the special form of knowledge that reindeer herders hold – that knowledge of how to alter spatial and temporal factors in the work – speaks against forms of trust and loyalty with political movements who attach themselves to the central budgets of nation states (as NGOs are wont to do). This may not be the best position from the point of view of wanting to forge a social movement of opposition to one or another policy. However, their choices speak to an interesting critique of the way that power is rearticulated in the post-Soviet present. The success and vibrancy of these new post-Soviet communities show that at least some highly personalised and highly contextualised communities can act competently in the global economy *and* be sensitive to local political issues. We should be cautious of theories that automatically reduce the local to the

parochial and instead pay attention to the actual practices which make life meaningful in the taiga and tundra frontiers of the global economy.

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Notes

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2. It is very difficult to give an authoritative account of reindeer numbers in this region. According to the verbal account of Aruneev, the working-unit received 450 reindeer 'on paper' in 1992 but in reality took possession of only 315 head. Similarly in 2004 he claimed that the working-unit had 309 reindeer but to this researcher's eyes it looked closer to 500.
3. This local legend is very evocative but extremely difficult to imagine. The geography of Lake Essei and the surrounding mountains is not one that would make it easy for one family to keep such a large herd. Unpublished records from the Polar Census of 1926/27 seem to indicate that an extremely large number of reindeer was held by three Osogostok brothers, which if put together, would number around 5,000 head. It is conceivable that if a calving season were particularly good, and if the reindeer were gathered in one place that the round number of 10,000 would be achievable in 1928 or 1929. More likely than not this number refers to a macro-herd held over a large territory by a number of intermarried relatives.

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